



UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY



127 032

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY









•

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

•





MAGDA VON HATTINGBERG



RAINER MARIA RILKE

# *Letters to Benvenuta*

BY

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

*With a Foreword by Louis Untermeyer*



PHILOSOPHICAL LIBRARY  
NEW YORK

Copyright, 1951, by  
THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIBRARY, INC.  
15 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Translated from the original German  
*So lass ich mich zu Träumen gehen*  
by *Heinz Norden*

## CONTENTS

<i>A Foreword</i> —BY LOUIS UNTERMAYER	I
<i>Preface</i> —BY RUDOLF VON JOUANNE	7
<i>“A Note From Benvenuta”</i>	13
<i>The Letters</i>	15

.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Portrait of Rainer Maria Rilke	<i>Frontispiece</i>
Portrait of Magda von Hattingberg	<i>Frontispiece</i>
Facsimile of an original letter by Rilke	<i>Facing page 14</i>

## A FOREWORD

It was in January, 1914, that Rainer Maria Rilke received his first letter from a Viennese correspondent who had discovered his little collection of stories, *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* ("Tales of the dear Lord God"), and had fallen in love with them. A sudden, intense, and even feverish exchange of letters followed, a correspondence which inevitably brought together the poet and the woman hitherto unknown to him. Rilke was going on forty. Separated from his wife, he was physically ill and mentally depressed, fearing the loss of his creative power, alternately dreading and desiring a self-determined isolation. She was many years younger, a concert pianist of no small repute. She, too, was alone; her early marriage had ended in a divorce, and she was seeking for something, or someone, mortal yet beyond the flesh. In Rilke she found not a man but an apparition, a super-earthly

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

saint, a visionary Fra Angelico—at their first meeting she thought: “He has come by a miracle to our poor earth and me.”

The woman, Magda von Hattingberg, told the story of that strange attachment and the short but dramatic association in *Rilke and Benvenuta* (W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1949), a revealing volume which she subtitled “A Book of Thanks.” The quasi-narrative of that book is amplified and enriched in *Letters to Benvenuta*, a series of letters written by Rilke during his second sojourn in Paris. Rilke had traveled restlessly: from Prague, where he was born, through the military schools of Moravia; to Germany; Russia, where he met Tolstoy and attended the Pushkin festivals; Denmark, because of his great admiration for the Danish novelist, Jens Peter Jacobsen; France, where he lived with Rodin. Then, after the break with Rodin and during Rilke’s “dry” period, he journeyed to Tunis, Algiers, Biskra, the Nile, which affected him deeply; Cairo, where he had a three-weeks’ serious attack of sickness; north to Venice, to be watched over by the Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, who installed him in the ancient castle at Duino near Trieste on the

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

Adriatic; then Spain, where his illness overcame him again; then, in 1913, back to Paris.

It was in Paris that there began the extraordinary correspondence which is disclosed in this book. To be more exact, only half of it is here—Magda von Hattingberg, rechristened “Benvenuta” by Rilke, has withheld the letters which prompted the poet’s introspective and far-reaching replies—but the portion reprinted is of inestimable value as a supplement to what we know about the author of the immensely popular *The Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke* and the profoundly moving *Duino Elegies*. Here, as in the poetry, Rilke writes not only on two levels—statement and suggestion, observation magnified by imagination—but on many levels of consciousness swiftly and simultaneously.

Sometimes the writing is placid and even happy; sometimes it is full of tortured apprehension—the letters were composed daily, often several a day—they floated serenely from his musing mind or hurtled out of the depths of his troubled spirit. The record is tantalizingly brief. Although there had been at least one previous exchange of epistles—apparent in *Rilke and Benvenuta*—the first letter

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

in this volume is dated February 1, 1914, and the last was written twenty-six days later. A scant month is encompassed, yet in these pages there is indicated a lifetime of loneliness and longing, of fear and frustration and desperate hope. No one could assuage his gnawing discontent or satisfy the sick need which he himself only partially understood. No woman could heal him—not even his dearest friend-sister-spiritually beloved, the radiantly and too eagerly welcomed one.

It is probable that Rilke's abnormal shyness stemmed from his unfortunate childhood when his mother, who disliked men, dressed the growing boy in girl's clothing, made him dust the furniture, and do a woman's work in the house. It is likely that his desire to escape the everyday world and become a "solitary" was the result of his enforced training in the military schools and was intensified by the rejection of his father. Other things besides the death of a beloved and protective uncle—a tragedy which drove the adolescent Rainer to the verge of suicide—made it difficult for the mature Rilke to establish normal relations with his fellow men, to enjoy the personal give-and-take of society, and to conclude that all human influences were "disas-

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

trous" and life itself hostile. It would require an intricate examination to account for Rilke's violent renunciations, his passion for suffering, his vehement refusal to consider psychoanalysis—but this is not the place for such a study. Resenting Freud, Rilke insisted on the sanctity of the inner self, a sacred mystery which it was the artist's duty to preserve; the strongest impulses of life arose, he claimed, from the very fact that the creative spirit does not know—and does not want to know—itsself: "it is inexhaustibly connected through its own deep, psychic mystery with all the mysteries of the world, even with God himself, by whom it is secretly and richly sustained."

Nevertheless, these letters to Rilke's "Benvenuta" reveal glimpses behind the self-protecting cover if they do not completely lift the veil of the mystery. They are alternately blinding and blurring, a series of kaleidoscopic flashes, a play of swiftly changing ideas, images, moods, and emotions. The tone may be contradictory, even within the same letter, intensely communicative yet incomplete, passionate and yet guarded, brilliant with anticipatory delight and darkened with a premonition of doom. The fierce effort to achieve pure clarity in a world of

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

confused materialism shows the dedicated mystic. Here is the complex of the artist's pain and struggle, of his resignation and revolt, of his distrust of people and his life-giving love with which he animated inanimate things. Here, in short, is the man briefly emerging from the mask, the letter-writer finding the inspired—and inspiring—correspondent, inseparably uniting the mortal person and the immortal poet.

LOUIS UNTERMAYER

Brooklyn, N. Y.  
January, 1951

## P R E F A C E

There is a remote quality about the personality of Rilke, even though, in some strange fashion, he seems to grow ever closer to us out of the distance, transcending himself, as it were. Over the years there have been many interpretations of him, on many levels. Here the voice of the poet himself rings out to us.

Benvenuta's first book on Rilke\* was a document of quiet and reverent gratitude. The infinitely appealing picture she drew in it was irradiated with the warm light of intensely personal impressions and memories, and hence she succeeded in making visible his innermost nature. The present volume, by way of ideal supplement, vouchsafes us the poet's own tongue.

Now that gentle hands have proffered us the pastel background to see, the pure image of the poet can be set against this lovingly illuminated environment, unconsciously limned in his own pen.

*\*Rilke and Benvenuta.* A book of Thanks. By Magda von Hattingberg. Translated by Cyrus Brooks. William Heinemann, London, 1949.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

The editor of these letters has therefore deliberately foreborne comment on any of the passages; nor has he offered any explanatory text to connect the several letters. Thus these pages bear their own valid witness to a segment of Rilke's life, testimony sharply reflecting the infinite complexity of a truly creative mind. The most trivial mundane incidents give forth a spark that kindles to a searing flame in the poignancy of a single word, a thought, a depth but glimpsed. Yet side by side with the brusque and passionate surrender to the uniqueness of all things, with the awareness of the mysterious world spreading out behind all that happens, stands not only a fervent will to live, but a sorrowful sense of leave-taking—resignation.

Hence these letters will be of incalculable value to all who are sincerely concerned with obtaining a true and authentic picture of the poet's work. The scholarly biographer may, among other things, prize Rilke's confession that *Malte Laurids Brigge* \* had absorbed much of his own nature. But beyond such things, these letters speak a language so in-

\* *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Translated by John Linton. The Hogarth Press, 1930. Published in the United States as *The Journal of My Other Self*. Translated by M. D. Herter Norton and John Linton. W. W. Norton & Co., 1930.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

tense, so intimately personal, that we must go far afield to find its like. How deeply moving are those few bare lines, hinting at Rilke's longing for the love within which children should be granted rest, that imponderable sense of shelter for which the boy Rainer so often yearned in vain, and which guided his heart as though by instinct to Benvenuta, years younger than he, his sister, his friend!

In the surface sense of the word, he cannot be said to have been truly musical. The strains of music evaded his memory, blended into his whole world. Yet in the recitals Benvenuta held for his special benefit, in the very memory of those hours, music guided Rilke back to his spiritual home. He loathed all constraint, though in his work he bowed to an austere regimen, a rigid schedule he scarcely ever blinked. Yet these letters show the poet in those rare intervals when he ignored his carefully regulated stint, returning to the world of his dreams, thoughtful or smiling in exaltation, and not infrequently melancholy with the chafings of nostalgia for that evanescent abode where his unquiet heart might rest, raising as it were the helpless arms of an outcast child. Caught in such a quandary, such a maze of confusion, he sought

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

refuge, in these letters to his trusted friend, from his lofty sense of duty that chained him to his daily work with its intellectual demands. He pondered Benvenuta's music, let his involved commitments go, and drifted back into the childhood land of his soul—"Thus do I yield to dreams."

It is fitting that we pay personal tribute to the woman whom we must thank, in a dual sense, for this deep insight into the realms of Rilke's soul. Vouchsafed the privilege of accompanying him on his way for a while in closest spiritual intimacy, she is one of the few who have fathomed the mysteries of that soul.

Benvenuta has not seen fit to add her answering letters to this slim volume, though unquestionably they returned to her possession upon Rilke's death. Thus she has hushed the echo that might have rendered publication of this book far more sensational. She is not concerned with sensationalism. Like a priestess performing her rites, she shares with us the gift a great man trustfully placed into her hands. In this she seeks—in keeping with Rilke's own desires—to bear witness to his life and growth, "when the time shall have come."

And it has come, that time. A fearful, gloomy

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

time of guilt and error, but a time, also, of hunger—a time bent on rearing temples within its hearing, to hearken in solemn reverence to the plaints and yearnings and glories of God, the "Great Neighbor."

It is no mere quirk, nor a hollow phrase, if these pages are specifically dedicated to young people. It may be ineluctably ordained unto the end of time that nothing in this world is ever lost, no single gesture nor prayer; but it is youth, above all, that has been plunged into darkness, youth—boy or girl—that was herded into a nondescript mass to bear the arms of hate, ere yet it was able to savor a foretaste of the sweetness of life—its unity and individuality. How many young people have been debarred from giving abode, in their innermost hearts, to the radiance and harmony of poetic grace! Let this light, then, stand out against the gloom, a chord struck from the heart, soaring above the welter of a world in chaos—a small book, but a precious boon of humble, prodigal loving-kindness.

It is in this sense that the present document, blossoming with the mysterious heart's blood of a soul consumed in fire, is placed into the open hands of youth, of all those who are themselves pure in

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

heart. May they accept it in gratitude and reverence, to strengthen the all but extinct power of the heart, a power that ever exalts us to the stars, far beyond the present, time out of mind.

RUDOLF VON JOUANNE

## “A NOTE FROM BENVENUTA”

Dear American friends:

This book is dedicated to those young people who have retained a sense of reverence, and to all others who are pure in heart. It means to speak to you as a friend speaks to friends, as one man speaks to his fellows, whose sorrows and joys he has understood and shared. This globe of ours is caught up in material and violent turmoil, as it has ever been. In such times all of us stand in dire need of marshaling all our inner powers. Since the beginning of time they have always been the essential unifying element, stronger than any material things that keep us apart; and if this was true in the beginning, how much more so today and tomorrow! This inner power, this spirit of loving understanding—they are what Rilke possessed to such a high degree. If it should be within the power of this little book to make a contribution toward the inward human bond from continent to continent, that would be the highest honor we could render Rilke on his memorial day. I send you this book

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

confidently, with all my best thoughts and wishes. The distance between us will vanish when we join, in a spirit of friendship, in commemorating the great poet.

Magda von Hattingberg (Benvenuta)

Gmunden, Austria, December 4, 1950, the 75th birthday of Rainer Maria Rilke.

Paris, noch von Salben H.

Gute Freunde, heute morgen, da ich  
Ihren, in London, Freunde und Bekannten  
und besonders meine Gefühle mit mir,  
nach London ausdrücken wollte, habe ich das  
für mich bedacht, Mühselig, Fortschleife:

Dass in meiner letzten Tussellation -  
kein Möglichkeit besteht, mich zu bewegen,  
als sehr selbst einen großen Versuch gefasst  
gegen die Entstehung von Klavieren in mir,  
nur nicht, eine Zeit bei meinem Kunst,  
dass ich nicht wissen, als sehr zu überwinden,  
das mit meinem Sinne.

Denn jenseits ist bedacht, so ist das am  
eindeutigen, dass es jetzt und hier nicht sein  
kann. Ich habe nur eine Unternehmung, was  
ich in der selben Untersuchung (gut oder arg, wie  
es abzu ist) zu ~~bestimmen~~ seinem Ausgang  
bringen muss, denn mit jedem Ton (das  
weiß ich) kommen andere Zeiten für an,  
die Dinge. So wollen wir das Linsige nicht

## THE LETTERS

Paris, 17, rue Campagne Première

February 1, 1914

My paper—the letter sheets—is here now, dear friend, but let me make bold to say: It has been my settled custom to write *you*\* on this paper which I ordinarily use for my work, and let it rest at that . . . My friend, were *you* but to come!—but then again, when I think that we might really meet, I feel as though I should be deceiving *you*; for one thing, *you* see, *you* must accept in the fullest sense what I wrote *you* the other day about the limitations of my ear; it is like the skin on the sole of a new-born babe; that is to say, not only as new, as unused, with all actual contact still before it; but also as awkward, as impractical and clumsy, and

---

### \* *Translator's Note*

Rilke addresses Benvenuta both with the formal *Sie* and the familiar *Du*, sometimes within the self-same letter. To make this significant distinction clear, the translator has chosen to italicize *you* and *your*, whenever these words represent the formal pronouns.

im Gegenwärtigen mangelt, vom Gegen-  
wärtigen selbst ist Ihnen, ob Sie das noch  
wissen; rings rings.

Ist das besprochen? Ist das, das auf  
seinem Wege durchführt, Ihnen ein Freund,  
mangelt es mit dem, der aus den früheren  
Jahren zuerst Ihr Freund werden dürfte?  
Was werden Sie mir schreiben im nächsten  
Brief, und Sie wird je ganz aus der  
Welt, an den jüngsten, gar nicht sein, mag  
es ihn nun anrufen oder veranlassen.  
Ihre Freunde aber - schreiben? - Kommen  
das alles können Sie sehen.

Rainer Maria Rilke

(Schrift, als handschriftlich,  
gegen Abend.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

perhaps (as I was assured time and again even when I was still a child) altogether incapable of walking, unable to learn even the first faltering steps. (In truth, I cannot remember a single tune, not even songs that have moved me, that I have heard thirty times over. I recognize them, but am quite unable to strike up even a single note on my own. This may well be the crassest weakness of all.) . . . Have I even the right to open *your* letters?—are they not all addressed to someone else, someone in the past, someone for whom I myself at times feel something like nostalgia, if truth be told? . . .

(Later) Dear friend, this morning, when in a single rush from my innermost being I sought to pour out my joy to *you*, and admonition and a thousand other sentiments, I neglected one matter of real importance:

There is no scope for making music, as I am presently established. I myself have waged a valiant fight against the very existence of pianos in my proximity. One does stand at my neighbor's, but dare not stir. My ire has vanquished it.

And the more I think about it, it may well be a

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

good thing that this is not to be, *here* and *now*. I have embarked on certain undertakings which I must bring to a conclusion in the *same* frame of mind (good or ill, as it may happen to be) ; yet every new note (as I well know) sets the scene for other times, other things. Hence let us not mingle the future with the present—I have written *you* of the present—I am still in the midst of it, fighting, struggling . . . I have simply hardened my heart to my fellow man ; at best I have been willing to be redeemed by an angel—with such a one I am confident of reaching the proper footing. Surely there is a degree of need to which the angels must lend ear, radiations of extreme emergency which men do not even perceive, which pass through their dense world, and only over yonder, in the angel's aura, strike a gentle, sorrowful note of violet, like a tinge of amethyst in a pocket of rock crystal . . .

Does this startle *you*? Am I who undergo all this in my peculiar fashion a stranger to *you*, compared to the man who on the strength of the earlier books was granted the boon of becoming *your* friend?

This *you* will write me in the next letter, and it will be addressed wholly to me, the present me, whether he be understood or denied.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

But surely all this can in no wise impair *your* own sense of gladness!

Rainer Maria Rilke

(A hasty postscript in the late afternoon) . . .  
Things that do not yet have a name are surely best left to the future and its certainties; and thus what we cannot very well call a "reunion" is likely to be in the best hands. But before then (and perhaps it will take a very long time), *please*, an occasional line, whenever people, impressions, a book, on a sudden bring *your* friend to mind.

In the morning

Dear, dear soul, so deeply am I moved at times that it seems you must be present. This morning I rose—I spoke to you, as though there were but you. Sister, dear, not even a picture of you do I have, can form none, guess at none—I see you only walking underneath the hoarfrost, dear, distant, distant figure! Frost—how long since I have seen a real one! Once, many years ago, in a bit of Swedish winter—we were riding in a sleigh through a countryside quite obliterated by its gleaming

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

burden—but then, *walking* is almost more beautiful still, in the great pure silence. Some day we shall walk like that together, shall take it upon our two selves to outrage the jackdaws with our irrepressible exuberance . . . Worries are folly, as Goethe's mother said so briskly, according to Bettina—aye, aye, each night the starry sky arches, full of law. Measured against it, there *are* no cares—there are none in music, none in my poems, yet my heart is filled to overflowing with them . . .

Dear one, you must accustom yourself to beholding my heart—it is not an easy thing, believe me . . . Look closely into the trained telescope—over there, that tiny, tiny point of light—have you got it?—that is my heart, scarcely recognizable . . . Ah, my sister, is it a mansion? Is it but a bright, rigid spot in the rock, blinking blindly from among the lambent green of busy nature?—

(Do not become alarmed—time and again I would address you formally, but I cannot do so, *and* call you “sister”—that would sound as though I were ill abed and you, in starched uniform, had engaged to nurse, not me alone, but all the world, without distinction.)

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

Later

Just then the *femme de ménage* arrived to clean up—very late, filled each morning with a new store of gossip, never even dreaming that one might not feel like listening. And so one allows oneself to be watered for a while, like a potted plant, trusting to nature's well-known magnanimity that somehow this *humidité* too will make one grow. *Hélas, chère amie*—how all these minor characters, admitted in order to bring quiet efficiency to the irksome concerns of the day, themselves become a source of noise, a handicap, a downright annoyance! It is almost as though one had bought a set of rugs, only to stumble over each one, at every conceivable occasion. To make the story short, I did what I do each morning—having been sufficiently watered, I ran off.

Paris, February 5, 1914  
17, rue Campagne Première

Here is the third letter (since yesterday), my friend. In the morning I wired *you*, ruing in advance that I should do so—but, to tell the full truth, I *had* to do it—ah, what am I saying? When it comes to truth, I should have to write *you* day and

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

night, to express all that rises and stirs to and fro amid the contradictions, and even then God only knows whether I should make myself understood, since, after all, I myself do not understand it all. Yet from the very first letter I have not felt right about troubling *you* with nothing but the circumstances of my life, which are, after all, no concern of *yours*—making that life important before *you* and in the end merely succeeding in beclouding, with these many words, the pure joy *you* have borne toward me, as a Spring breeze wafts the Spring day before it. What shall I do?

For months I have played a game of hide-and-seek, and now that *your* fine joy suddenly seeks me out, I behave like a small boy who takes the matter dreadfully seriously, cries out “not yet, not yet!” and wants to be hidden even more artfully, so that he may later on savor for himself the utmost shock and ecstasy of being found.— Then again, when I write like this, I seem to myself like a valley begging the good sun to delay its rising (yes, I implore the good sun!), telling it what has happened throughout the night, about the storm and the gloom, and how disgracefully unkempt the trees look now.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

Who are *you* really, dear friend? This garden of mine fears the sun—it is so badly dug-up, so topsy-turvy. It does not even look like a garden now, but is once again committed solely to the business of growing. It is preparing for winter, for a long process of gestation beneath its hard, harsh, ugly surface. Surely it is not fit to receive *you* in all your radiance, nor the god, or demigod, who dwells within *you*, impatient for action. Imagine, if *you* will, that Orpheus, with his unfathomable lyre, had run athwart the Lord's Creation ere the mountains had risen and the waters run off! In the self-same way I think I too ought first to rear my few rocks, send forth my river—and no one should be tempted to mistake my dozen odd trees for anything but trees. Then let divine tranquillity or the storms of inspiration do with them what they will—things beyond all comprehension—stir them and sweep them.

Do I distress *you*, friend? Surely I could not do such a thing, in the face of *your* wondrous joy!

Again, I tell myself that surely what I here recount and strew across *your* path must not serve to deter *you* from coming to visit me soon, if *your*

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

schedule permit it without violence, and if *your* desire to that end be maintained. For besides me, Heaven knows, there is Paris, and this much is certain: She is incomparably fairer in the Spring than in the Fall, especially to one who has never seen her before.

I shall now tell *you* in all sincerity how I, in keeping with the habits of my solitary soul, should respond to such an event. First of all, I should take *your* hand in both my own and let it rest in them as long as it pleased; then I should once again retire completely into my wonted aloofness, venturing nothing; yet we should have a few afternoons, an evening, a shared walk—things, all of them, that have never been our lot and that should mean so very much, because of their very rarity. We should have good things to say to each other beyond all measure, and in the end some future plan might be agreed upon in a more certain and tangible form, perhaps again with the help of that ugly, versatile, yellow monster\*; for even if it could somehow be done in practice, if a place and an instru-

\* *Translator's Note:* What is meant here is presumably the fat, yellow-covered European railway guide and timetable.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

ment could be found, I have the feeling that I should not allow *your* music to sweep over me *here*, in this city that has come to prey upon my mind to such an extent that I should not even be able to show it to *you* without guile. *Your* music (thus do I yield to dreams) should not only breathe new order into my inward world; it should be associated only with new outward relationships. *You* will say that I am immoderate. I am, my friend, and perhaps nothing of great urgency is ever moderate, least of all nature.

Rainer Maria Rilke

(If *you* were but to write that *you* have not become angry at me over all this!)

Paris, February 8, 1914

Oh, Benvenuta, what have I done, that the burden of *achievement* has always fallen to me in love, that, by my nature, I have never borne its sunny fruit, as an orange tree bears its innocent, blissful wealth? That I have had to go to and fro

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

with it, like a slave in the marketplace, weighed down, carrying provisions which I could not see, which some god purchased over my head to use for his feasts, to which I was not bidden?

Children *rest* in love (has this been ever granted me?), but then, they are unsullied in their illusion that it is possible to belong to someone; and when they say "mine," they make no claim to ownership; they grasp and let go, and when they do not, they cling to God, with whom they retain a subtle connection, who draws even others to himself through their guiltless open arms.

Can *you* explain why it is that people always become my undoing? I shall confess to *you* that if at this moment my neighbor were to enter—a young Hungarian painter whom I scarcely know, and to whom I bring no more than the sympathy one feels for young people when one is no longer quite convinced of one's own youth—no more than that—if that young man were to enter here now, having no conceivable inkling of *what* preoccupies me—I should yet put aside my pen and for two hours on end, until I ran out of breath, relate impressions and memories to him, with the warmth (can *you* conceive of such a thing?)—with the warmth that

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

belongs to *you*, that is of rights *yours* in this place—with that self-same suppressed warmth—what in the world is this? Surely not kindness, weakness, sickness, vanity, a crime? And I do the same thing with my work. The innermost tension that exists for its sake, to which it alone has a claim, is released in some less worthy cause, is spent, vanishes into thin air. Must I then not keep myself well-stopped, as the merchants do their attar of roses? And, dear, am I not right in doing so? Why should I not say that I prefer to be alone? My friend, believe me, this is my sole desire. In the same breath with which I implore God to *let* me love you, I beg him, I implore him to strengthen my will for militant solitude, for such is the destiny of every fiber of my being. Oh, do you not feel it in my heart?—do you not feel it when you hold your hands against it—that ineffable urge to push everything aside, all tenderness, to stride irresistibly from deed to deed, down the hard and splendid path of action? Can you feel it? Is it not true that, in the end, there may be no need for anyone to lay my funeral pyre, since I myself have touched the torch of ecstasy to my unblemished heart, that it consume itself utterly and flare up in a single flame to God?

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

But here I am under lock and key, you see, behind barred doors, yet I do not act. Once, unless I am mistaken, it seemed to me each morning, or now and then at least, as though each beginning were the first, the only one. Long since, now, it has been very different. The least and the greatest that I undertake—even ventures that are dear and familiar to me (and these perhaps most of all)—are burdened in advance by such an indescribable weight of experience and suspicion of incapacity. In the morning, when I lay out my work—sometimes, indeed, start on nothing more than a letter—a sense of foreboding sweeps over me: You shall not be able to do it!—and often enough I cannot. True, the crucial element in art—what people have long called “inspiration”—is not within our power; but *that* I have always understood—it could not be otherwise, because we are so fickle—and it has never troubled me; nor have I ever used the slightest means for conjuring it up. To be patient in the face of the divine is natural, for it is governed by standards of its own. The difficulty arises from another side and has but slowly spread its infection to the point where my real certainties lie. A young and rather eccentric author (I should like to send

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

you his book—his name is Marcel Proust—the pencil-marked copy over which I have spent my evenings) speaks of a peculiar fear that haunted his childhood and exerted great influence on him. In the later course of his life, when there should have been no more question of such a fear, he nevertheless thought he still recognized it in different guises, *c'est cette angoisse qui revient dans l'amour*. If that be true, mine is the next phase, *l'angoisse de ne pouvoir pas aimer qui revient dans la travail*.

(The suddenly inspired familiar address does not mean that I forego the earlier form. I want to say everything to *you*—call *you* by every name—and thus keep mindful that to me *you* are both nearness and distance, that you are both an open door and refuge from it.)

My dear friend, I see *you* are familiar with *Brigge*. There is no identity, of course, but it is true that he absorbed much of my own life, some of it almost completely—yet what a different record it would be, if the ineffable sorrows of the three or four years that have elapsed since then were suddenly to be precipitated in words! The rift in my heart dates only from certain other events—that

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

rift that must be the reason why my heart flutters so fitfully when it is touched by nature, by the stars, by lofty things. (You should have heard it before—the exalted purity with which it sounded forth, when purely touched!) That was on a great journey to another continent, when I had laid open my mind to the most powerful things; and since it lay wide open, fatefully distorted circumstances overwhelmed it at the same time. Deeply receptive, surrendered to grandeur, I was yet steeped in guilt and torment; I lost all my bearings, all self-assurance, but for that one spot in my heart which has retained its inborn stability in every vicissitude. I recall a night in a small hotel room in a Tunisian town—the nightmarish atmosphere in which I dwelt had infected my innermost being so frightfully that the very hands with which I touched myself seemed like strangers to me. There was no electric light, and I lit a candle. I sat on my bed—friend, sister, try to understand: That simple little flame, into which I must have so often drowsily gazed as a child—will you believe it, it was the first thing in a long time that I knew and recognized, a cherished survivor from an earlier, lost world—*my* world! Can you understand that? I was touched to

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

the heart, felt a swelling sense of gratitude—something like the feeling that now joins me to you . . .

You who are full of love—

. . . My life was never given a foundation. No one was able to imagine the direction of its growth. In Venice there stands the so-called *Ca' del Duca*, a princely fundament, on which subsequently the most wretched tenement came to be built. With me the case is opposite—the fine arches to which my spirit soared rest on the most tentative beginnings, on a wooden scaffold, a few flimsy boards. . . Is that why I feel thwarted in rearing the nave, the steeple to which the burden of the great bells is to be hoisted (by angels—who else could do it?) ? . . . How wonderful are great lives, how wonderful is *yours* to me, dear friend!—a life to which I suddenly speak as though I were talking to the clouds and the depths of my sky, to settle when there are to be showers in my nature and when the weather is to be clear.—How overwhelming is the impact, night after night, from sky to earth! I sleep by open window, and when I open the bedroom casement (it adjoins the lofty studio where I live and

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

work)—when I open it, I must first compose my face, that it be equal to the nearest star. How feeling overwhelms the spirit! What freedom in the soul! How overpowering the fellowship of man!

Tomorrow night *you* will be in Berlin. Perhaps my letter will be waiting for *you* there, the letter I wrote yesterday afternoon, still dispatching it to Vienna. This one I shall not be able to post until early tomorrow—my little postoffice takes Sunday seriously and will not be receptive again until tomorrow.

Farewell, dear true friend, champion on behalf of my future, fine, joyful heart, dear one, farewell! Tell me soon how it is with you in Berlin—I know many of your errands . . .

R.

(Here are three little pictures of me—may I soon have one of *you*? There are no others, for I have not allowed any to be taken for some ten years. In part, because I do not like self-conscious modern photographs (*old* ones all the more)—in part, because the indiscreet publicity of our age too readily broadcasts a picture, making it a fatuous article of commerce. As for Busoni's book ("Out-

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

line of a New Esthetics of Music”), I should like to devote some quiet hours to it, if I may have it from you; and if you have time for Proust’s “Swann’s Way,” I shall send it to you shortly.)

[Undated, probably February 1914]

Oh, Benvenuta, thou unto me Benvenuta—can you understand it? Is there to be no limit to marvels? Your dream of Wednesday night! Do you know that was the night of which I wrote you that I lay as though caught up in slumbering creation, in the vast nameless spaces of sleep, where the spirit, plumed in the colors of sleep, wheeled with nocturnally wakeful eyes; the self-same night during which, from time to time, I noted down on little slips of paper things meant for you, things I thought could not wait, you must know at once; the same night when I sensed with a pellucid feeling all the hundred fatigues of my body, unquenched, each one whole, each one beyond healing, each in its place. Not that they were at rest—but each one lay, something like the trial bastings on an embroidery, side by side with its complementary repose, a gentle strand of silk, as it were—as though that repose

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

were to be worked by a loving hand, thread for thread, into the pale background, gently and thoughtfully, in utter peace, some day, soon. There I lay, you see, nor was there any balm for me. On the contrary, the fullness of my fatigue loomed like a figure of many digits in my physical awareness; but throughout my mind there emerged a sacred assurance, the promise of a beneficence so indescribable that I would not have dared stir, fearful lest I dispel the miracle that came so close. I remember that even in the morning I rose with great care, amazed at the grandeur of the night just past.—I was reminded of the Bible prophecies or the dream images in Dante's *Vita nuova*; never have I experienced anything like this temple-sleep through which strode a god not yet in action, but paving the way for action, planning and looking about.—And you, loving heart, that night you dreamed!

Last night, although right after your letter I had read something else that was very beautiful, I was assailed by an abject faintheartedness. May I tell you about this too, my sister?—I felt as though I should not be able to travel at all. It is a foolish case of nerves. Secluded here these past four months, I

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

sometimes feel like the released prisoner who grows bemused at the notion of stepping forth into the thick of things and events outside.—Then I somehow lose my physical courage. I wanted to go to sleep, but could get nothing done—even to go to sleep seemed like such an effort—and now to travel! Oh, scold me, dear heart: I fancy, perforce, how easily some clumsy outward circumstance, innocent in itself, might do less than justice to our meeting; that it should be more carefully prepared; that it must be safeguarded; that at the very least things should be as they are here in my room where, to a degree, interference and accident can be ruled out. Where I should be able to tell all my chattels: Quiet! she comes; or should say nothing, with the stillness of all things growing deeper and surer about my clamorous heart. Yet again, there are reasons why I should not like to see you here, against a background of sorrowful wear and tear—not for the first time, not quite. I must also make a confession to you: Some ten days ago I had the notion of journeying to meet Spring in the Umbrian countryside, since here it reminds me too much of other Springs; indeed, at times I am seized by a craving for long walks into the coun-

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

try, hour-long walks, by way of counterpoise to so much inner turmoil. (I do not know how early one dare go down there, without fear of still encountering winter, or a relapse into winter; but in any event, I have written to someone who ought to know.) And then, a few days later, when you mentioned Geneva, dear one, a hope kindled within me, immoderate as I am—I saw us sitting in a Geneva hotel, four about a table, the two of us separated by our respective “black bags,” gravely given seat and voice in the council. I saw your yellow book before us, read names to you of indescribable sound—Perugia, Assisi.—Dear heart, with such trivia do I toy; and dared not tell you about them. But when you mentioned Geneva, of all places, the thing took on a kind of fantastic probability (or am I again beyond the bounds of geography?). As for myself, I cannot yet truly estimate whether I should be doing well to go to Umbria and stay there a month or two; or whether it were better, wherever I might be, to come straight back to lectern and desk. (The black bag, lacking imagination and exhausted by lean years, naturally votes for the latter course—but you must know that often I consult it only to ignore utterly its irritable recommendations, de-

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

livered in the sober tones of a governess.) Truly, I am at a complete loss. This obstinate impediment has led me to indescribable lengths—shall I perpetuate it in seclusion (when you are here) ?

Now I am plaguing you for pages with this weakness (surely you can scarcely bear to read it) ! Excuse I have none, you see, since I truly hover a little between two lives: an old one that is past and that is beginning to seem quite implausible to me—and another of which nothing need be said, save that I do not yet quite believe in it.

Dear, my hands no longer feel themselves to be hands when they touch each other—they seek to achieve their mysterious destiny of being hands only in yours—your dear hands.

Rainer Maria

Paris, February 9  
17, rue Campagne Première

Dear bright sun, very well, smile—why should you not?—but your little boy is very much afraid of you—and this may be linked to the fact that the business of his being hidden away is not such an

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

exuberant fiction, after all: likely enough he has been up to all kinds of mischief in recent years, and has had to crawl away somewhere into a corner, rather in earnest. Yes, that is probably it.

February 10, early

I wrote this hurriedly yesterday, when *your* letter came, surprising me (I had not dared hope for another from Vienna)—then I had to let it go, torn not so much between traveling bag and inkwell, as between this sheet and another that sent its complaints of neglect from the work desk across to the writing-table, forever invoking its privileged claims, one by one—

Later

Time and again, dear friend, and even now, I am oppressed as though I were deceiving you. My reports must necessarily lead you to believe that I am badly off; but were you to enter here, you would look about and find that, within reason, it should be possible to live quite well in such circumstances.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

And when I speak of the bagnio of recent years, there were at least those great voyages; and whenever I returned, dismayed with their wealth, for better or for worse, old friends outdid one another in offering me shelter, their magnanimity growing in proportion to my despondency . . . Everything was present in splendid profusion, too much on every side—but is it not really a question of being surrounded by those few things one needs for the sake of the innermost task?—those things *alone*, ordered into the pattern of a constellation by inexorable necessity.—“Wondrous lady,” I should have said even a year ago, had a fairy suddenly appeared before me to grant me a wish, “give me a year of life in *my own* circumstances, in only the tranquil, calculable circumstances of my work. Nor shall this spoil me, but rather strengthen me to withstand all that is yet to come to me by way of unrest. Is it not true that even children, incomprehensibly, withstand the most violent upheavals, because they live in a world of naive fulfillment of needs and are unaware of the very possibility that change may burst upon them?”

In truth the fairy needed no examples—she should never have bided, and my speech might

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

have been much briefer, for I sense so very well just *what* is pertinent to my work. A little bit of real protection (perhaps a great, great deal) is necessary, since I go through life in a state of receptivity that responds to the ten-thousandth part of the merest hint, enticed day after day by at least forty different lives, not one of which accepts the validity of what I may have begun in another. Just for a while to have the same atmosphere about the soul!—an even level of goodness and security, such as is vouchsafed a patient in the open air, to restore the confidence of a body that has gone astray. Even days and even nights, pervaded by the gentle, hesitant call of work!

O my child—your hands, your music—

My fabulous one, fairylike invention of my heart, do not take fright when I let myself be swept away into such talk. Do not conclude that it implies any tangible hope, any claim on you—there is none, none—I know so well, moreover, that you—you of all people—lavish only what it is ordained from all eternity that you *must* give. Sister, have you ever visited a prisoner?—in this, at least, one must humor him, that he immoderately confuses the life outside, wherever it calls to him and before he has

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

beheld it, with his own life he has relinquished; but this too passes, and then he is once more restored to his peace, watching the spider in her gray corner, lost in admiration for the wholeness and infinity he finds in her.

If this be irksome to you, my friend, put me brusquely and resolutely in the place you mean me to occupy—I have been prepared for such ineffable sorrow that no harm will come to me if, within this shining joy, I take a few steps backward.

Before retiring

Dear heart, now night has come; a great full moon, stronger almost than my green-shaded lamp, is working its way in through the open studio window; once I was able to spend the evenings writing away—now fatigue overcomes me before I can think . . .

[February] 11, early

Come to think of it, sisterly one, how many things adverse to me I should have to tell you, to inspire you with the proper prejudice against me!

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

All the evil of which I am aware in myself and which I fail to overcome . . . all the crudities of my mind which others have proven to me when their utmost patience was exhausted . . . as though I had been told: you, René, you who on occasion sense and anticipate the subtlest, gentlest, airiest things—you were able to do that! . . . My friend, I do not know who said that first, but it would be frightful if *you* were to think it even once from afar. *You* see, I have been so convinced of the existence of this monstrous fault that I have at times tried to perceive calmly whence it may arise. I have been given to assuming in advance that people were hostile toward me, and I therefore told myself that I acquired whatever qualities of affection and intimacy I possess, not from people, but from a smattering of inanimate things that proffered themselves. Hence, in the end, I had no valid judgment about inflicting pain or pleasure. For similar reasons, after all, children are quite capable, right in the gentlest set-to, of twisting one's finger almost out of its socket, for they develop their guileless affections on dolls, which never talk back.

Still, when I then cast about after those things, I find that I am not really fair even toward them.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

It may be unavoidable that, within the sphere of a man who lives to himself, many things fare ill and perish, since there are so many he cannot conceivably help. But even among those objects I warmly affirm, I note this one or that reproachfully languishing, as though the tiny roots they have sunk into my mind encountered down below the stone of lovelessness, were expiring in a twist of plaintive silence. There was one occasion when such a qualm arose between myself and a little picture, making my very heart quiver (this, I suppose, was to be the test case). The fine colored daguerreotype of my father . . . on closer scrutiny a few tiny green metallic specks became visible in the region of one eye, as though some corrosion were eating at the plate. Concerned lest the damage make further inroads, I had a case made, lined inside and out with black suède, so that all light would be excluded. Occasionally I would seek the opinion and advice of people who seemed to know about such things—oh, love, must I go on?—all this, all this only that I might suddenly, in a random hour years later, rip open the back of the sealed frame, to dab at the plate with a wretched wad of cotton, aggravating the timid little defect

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

into real destruction, of course . . . sheer fumbling nervousness—but translate it for a moment into the intangible, emotional, intellectual sphere, and you will be uncertain *which* angel to implore on behalf of one who could act thus in a single instance, who suffers his innermost solicitude to be perverted like a hostile barbarian.

Toward evening

Then came a letter, I glanced at the stamp—still Vienna, I had not sensed it, though I felt *you* had to settle difficult, rebellious days; feel it, yet go and write *you* confused stuff about myself, my friend, rather than unwittingly hitting upon those few words (from the chance of a heart you have moved) that might possibly give *you* balm—you—*thee* who hast come to me,

R.

Friday, February 13, early

The postcard from Berlin: how glad I am it is here—everything seemed so distant, so silent. I am abysmally ignorant of geography, which troubles

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

me little, but I do not even know: are *you* now farther away, nearer at hand? Never mind, *you* are inconceivably close, in any event. Thus I shall swiftly dispatch these many sheets—the *femme de ménage* has already arrived. Good God, what will *you* have to read! I think it should be Sunday down *your* way.

Oh, love.

R.

[With a long letter]

Joyous one, my familiar, how much there is that I would make real for myself within you, within your heart, Benvenuta! . . . Friends of my childhood, girls—what has become of them!—Blessed Theresa of Avila, could love's arrow have penetrated into thy heart more imperiously than the dazzling silver point of fulfillment into swooning foreboding? One saw them coming down the street, recognizable from afar in all the guises of their grace—in truth, sensed them with one's whole body before they even turned the corner in company of their Frenchwoman.

Was there one who had an inkling? . . . One of them did know. I shall not forget it—it was of a

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

summer, in a little Bohemian watering resort, her name was Hueber, Fräulein Hueber (of course I knew her first name as well) ; and her family name, which I only just realized I remember, had its own peculiar charm, in that it must on no account be pronounced Hüber, as might have seemed natural, but only Hu-eber, whether that was agreeable or not: I found it enchanting. I cannot recapture her image, by the way—a slender, fair-haired figure, half-averted, flits through my memory; and just how she behaved during that certain scene has utterly slipped my mind (a trace of laughter haunts my ear, but it may not even be hers). Yet I can visualize the noonday promenade at the spa, the crowds, though I cannot recall whether I happened to follow her, nor just what fuss I did make over her. This much alone is certain: My extravagant sentiments had been discovered and this is what took place: I was seized by both arms from behind, below the shoulders, and before I knew what was happening, I was pushed through the crowds and in the bright sunshine planted foursquare before Fräulein Hueber, who was thus prevented from proceeding; and while the vise in which I was held grew ever more unyielding, a loud, merry voice

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

over my head related my secret story, rather accurately, I believe. I do not understand what further use I could have had for all the blood that shamed my face . . . But now I think of the man, and try to fathom what it was that had prevailed upon him. Did he perhaps love her?

Good God, if I were now to tell you, my familiar, how I withdrew time and again from such upheavals, how humdrum was my life, compared to these extravagances—why, it seems to me I never properly knew love at all.

Not that we did not arouse each other, nor lacked endearments, nor failed, in saying good-night, to undergo all the turmoil of parting and hope for another meeting—all this was present (almost too much so, I am inclined to think); but it did not necessarily flow from an inner richness and generosity. We might even have saved ourselves the trouble, had it not been unceasingly exacted from us by a certain suspicion of life. Just as some dogs eat only when someone makes a gesture as though to take the food from their dish, we reached for each other only because there was disease in the world and incalculable danger, because someone was always dying, and because there were so many

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

strange ways of drifting apart over all this. What joined us in this fashion must have been, above all, a kind of fear—yes, that is what it was!—we were mutually afraid of one another and for ourselves. We exhaled a dreadful fear of life and death, and then inhaled it again, diluted with only a tiny amount of real air. It was clear, moreover, so far as I was concerned, that the future was altogether unknown, and one sought to get that future into one's power, while it was still quite small, that it might grow up under restraint, as it were, never coming to know its own untamed character . . .

You, you (what shall I call you, what carefully chosen name, what name dear enough for my heart which sweeps toward you?)—behold: all this I consider for the first time, you make it real for me (for what knew I thereof?). I must take my own good time in writing you, the words coming like the first heavy drops from the charged wine-press of my past. I sense it, somewhere back there, in the legendary sphere, I must begin with my love for you—I, the beginner.

R.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

February 13, toward evening

You must know, I read no newspapers, though every day I buy two of them, that I may occasionally keep informed about exhibitions and the tireless foreign literary life. There is also another reason, for were I suddenly to cease calling for my two journals, the newsstand woman, rather than surmising that I had suddenly lost all interest in current doings, would be persuaded that her *Figaro* was not late enough for me and insist that I was buying it elsewhere. (Is not, I sometimes ask myself, love wrongly lived the reason why, even in the most superficial human affairs, the very *act of cessation* is in such bad odor, as though, of rights, it should never occur?) As for the times—our own—one should keep one's eye on them, quite true; well, even though I scarcely read about them, I do see on occasion what goes on and wonder to myself . . .

In yesterday's *Figaro* there was a prominent article entitled *De l'amour* and signed "Foemina," which is to say, Madame Bulteau. I read Madame Bulteau occasionally, and if I muster the necessary

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

resolve, it has to do with the fact that Mme. B. was the best friend of the late Countess de la Beaume, and that this Mme. de la Beaume left two rather strange books that strike a note of great intensity (the second surprised even those who had been close to this unusual and modest woman). It is for the sake of these striking books by another woman that I occasionally read Madame Bulteau who, on her part, is quite accomplished (you can see how everything with me arises cunningly and surreptitiously—are you beginning to feel uneasy?). So I began to read *De l'amour* too, yesterday, but did not get very far. What is this curious mixture of virtuosity and incapacity they call by that name here (and cannot mention often enough)? On the one hand the most exquisite skill, on the other everlasting frustration. Do you know what I felt like?—leafing through Plato's *Symposium* for the first time in a long while. When I first read it, I dwelt alone in Rome in a tiny house deep in an ancient park (the same house where I began *Brigge*, as yet unaware of what was to become of it). My friend, I grasped one thing then, predisposed as I may have been—there is no beauty in Eros; and when Socrates said so and in his cautious way waited for

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

his younger and more volatile conversational antagonist to block all other paths, one by one, leaving but the one way open—that Eros is not beautiful—Socrates himself then walking that path toward his god, serene and pure in heart—how then my innermost nature took fire that Eros could not be fair! I saw him just as Socrates had invoked him, lean and hard and always a little out of breath, sleepless, troubled day and night about the two between whom he trod, to and fro, hither and yon, ceaselessly accosted by both: yes, that was Eros. Truly, how they mistook him who thought he was fair, envied his soft life. Ah, he was slender and tanned and covered with the dust of the road, but there was no peace for him amid the two of them (for when, I say, is there not distance left between them?) ; and when he came he spoke with fervor of the other's beauty, teasing each heart to grow fairer, goading it on. Surely there is much in the book—we do not grasp it yet: once upon a time it *was* grasped—who lost it? How do we spend the centuries? Where is he among us who dare speak of *love*?

Verily, nature speaks not of love ; nature bears it in her heart and none knows the heart of nature.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

Verily, God bears love in the world, yet the world overwhelms us. Verily, the mother speaks not of love, for it is borne for her within the child, and the child destroys it. Verily, the spirit speaks not of love, for the spirit thrusts it into the future, and the future is remote. Verily, the lover speaks not of love, for to the lover it comes in sorrow, and sorrow sheds tears. Hush, hush—oh, it is music, then, that would speak! But when music speaks, she speaks not to us. The perfect work of art touches upon us only in that it survives us. A poem enters into language from within, in an aspect forever averted from us. It fills the language wondrously, rising to its very brim—but it never again thrusts toward us. Colors are congealed in a picture, but they are broidered into it like rain into the countryside; and all that the sculptor shows his stone is how it may most splendidly hold itself aloof. Music, indeed, is closer to our heart . . . but how much of her is beyond our reach, pushes just past us, carries right through us—and we comprehend it not! . . .

Benvenuta, you yourself, have you not at times sought to halt her, your heart filled with perplexity—and failed? Or would have failed, but for the angels that descend on you?

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

(Tell me much about your present good surroundings—above all, tell me much.)

[February] 14, toward dusk

My friend,

*Your* letter, the big one, has been here since morning, but it came in company with a great mass of correspondence and importunities. I did not like to see it mixed up with all that, nor *your* picture; both have been lying there, as though tonight, when it grew dark, there were to be Christmas. Benvenuta, now Christmas has come—I have read your pages, shall now read them again, like one who has been called away from the room where the gifts are laid out, and who hurries back to finger everything anew.

Yes, here they stand, those grave, gravid thoughts, in the splendid reflection of our sacred joy, yours and mine.

You are so close to me that I can scarcely write you for your very nearness. You are in the air of this room, and only now and then, bending over your picture, do I compare your invisible presence

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

with the soaring flight of your brows in the grave firmament of your countenance.

Rainer

February 15

. . . . .

(Later)

The "events," dear child, and what part of them still enfolds you—I know that one cannot speak of this save in that hour (bound to come) that will be gently set aside from all the turmoil . . . thus I can but accept them quietly. They sink into my blood with all their gravity, joining so many others that are beyond comprehension, whose pain is beyond relief . . .

Five years—such was the length of my military education, from my tenth to my fifteenth year (what years they were!). I think this must be the utmost limit—no one has ever stayed under water longer. Sometimes, since that time, I have understood the legendary character slowly taken on by remote, defenseless sorrow; sometimes it is too

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

much for me even now; for I went through it in those years when it impressed itself on every aspect of the shape of the future, then still pliable. All the same, whenever a fragment of it reaches into my consciousness, even though but in legendary form, I marvel at the splendor of the sorrow suffered, I stand as though at the tombs of heroes and do not fully fathom its mighty and heroic state of death.

But let me say this unto you: Magda. If you should feel some day (and since yesterday there have been times when such a feeling has risen within me, quietly, fleetingly) that this timeless hour of ours should come *soon*; if you crave it like sleep, or a draught of water; if you think it might enable you to absolve, with more serenity and as though from a gentle imminence, that part of the past still in the future—if you feel all this but for an instant, then, dear, dear heart, let us order the days in calm and thoughtful providence, where you will, and when and how, and as many of them as you will, as soon as it seems right to you. Promise me this. You must know that I am rather at loose ends. What holds me here at my work is my conscience, my dutiful submission to this stubborn

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

regularity, to which I myself have pledged and bound myself, knowing well what I am about. As things stand now, you would not interrupt it from without but from within; and of that I need have no fear . . .

Last night I lay awake for some time, pondering the sorrows of your childhood. My heart circled them at a distance, as a lion prowls about a fire in the desert by night. . . . Profoundly Slavic man that I somehow am, I almost envied you the violence you have suffered. When one considers how it brought you into focus, made you into a person—something that would not have been so readily possible in the presence of a vaguely aloof God—made you struggle day after day on familiar terms with forces usually but sensed—when one considers all this, one's heart beats higher at the splendid prospect bound to issue from such human deceit. It occurred to me that in the Russian soul, which knows no dividing line between divine and human severity, this experience might have come about more directly in its innermost form: a submersion of God in an experience of God.—

If you knew what dogs meant to me (I was never permitted to have one) as I watch them, you

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

would not doubt that I have *seen* them as you have shown them to me from your window—the two who were the “stupidest and merriest” of all. They and the little windmill and the Major. To my mind this group resembles those three magnificently simple-minded puppets—Punch, the Princess, and the Owl—which I bought last Fall in Munich with Ruth, in an ancient stationery shop behind Papa Schmidt’s puppet theater—bought so that someone—to wit, Regina Ullmann (of whom I shall tell you some day)—might write a proper piece for them—I, of course, cannot think of one—a piece written expressly for this unlikely trinity, so far apart that there is room enough between them for the most spirited action. (I wonder whether Betti, and you with her, might dream up a few things that could happen among these three—mind you, properly developing the plot!—if they were to be left to their own devices on the stage of a fine marionette theater, against a backdrop representing, let us say, a fearsome dungeon!)

Dear, I write the name “Ruth,” and you, my familiar time out of mind, you do not even know that I have a small daughter (small? twelve years old, like Betti)—a girl, a school girl, resolute and

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

womanly, carefree and rather practical—whom I see rarely, but with whom I maintain a firm and rather roguish friendship . . . . .

. . . . .  
. . . . .

That I cannot be of much help to children, in the face of my own uncertainties and troubles—(their questioning and buffeting and experimenting assumes that grown-ups shall be possessed of the most wonderful equanimity, the most perfect serenity, indeed, some kind of finality)—that you will understand; but by and by much about my relationship to Ruth, which I myself but half know and cannot trace very far, will emerge and become explicit to you; and I foresee that you will make much of it fruitful for me.

You shall get the Proust—it will be sent tomorrow, together with this letter.

Good night.

(But how will you arrange matters so that this fat book shall not put you beyond reach of big and little alike? I do not want that on my conscience, and besides, the little windmill wants to be looked

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

at from time to time from your table. And I—  
what is to become of me, once you begin reading?)

Rainer

(Later) . . . Keep to whatever fills and preoccupies you, my dear heart, think not that you must reply to my every letter—just be there, *just be there* . . .

I too have had an inquiry from the concert management firm of Hermann Wolff—whether I should care to give a reading in Vienna sometime in 1914/15. Warsaw, I am sorry to say, has never yet called me (I know it only from a carriage, after an endless night of travel, crossing early in the morning from one station to another, part of an endless day and still another night, journeying into the vastness of Russia. Verhaeren recently came thence and had much good to say; but since he was in Moscow and Petersburg as well, memories of those cities naturally predominated by far, especially Moscow).

. . . Heart, I could wish you called me by a name that is mine without my rightly knowing it, as in the Bible someone is called by a name his

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

mother never voiced—and he never told that this be a name like the wonted one, hearing only: I call thee: for thou art . . .

I do not fully recall all my other given names, never found them interesting, pieced together, as they were, at random, for immediate family considerations—not borrowed from more ancient traditions, so that something might sound in them, of which one is not aware, though it belong to one, God knows whence. But I shall look at my baptismal certificate (a pathetic document, terribly ancient and quite weak in the folds, as though I had been born about 1740). Sometimes I almost think it is true. For there is nothing that so much disconcerts me as our time, in some of its qualities (perhaps the best). It often seems to me—I was just writing this to Herr von Schlözer, who sent me the letters of his great-uncle, the Ambassador in Rome about 1860—that only the old-fashioned era could still be called “time”—I sense it somewhere in the future too, in mighty Russia of the future—while our own age is but a swift escape from not-having-time.—

Hence there may be real danger in the attempt to introduce the pulse beat of our own days deep

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

into some securely exalted structure that may have no other purpose, so far as we are concerned, than to survive us in its splendid dimensions.

But what is all this I write to you, love, yet would but speak of the *place*, about which our earthly plans might hover and sustain themselves (as I once saw the butterflies do, a whole summer long, in a fine Bohemian park—picture the scene, as they disport themselves roundabout the fullblown flowerheads of lofty heliotrope shrubs) ; very well, the place. It shall, can, may be any place you choose, so that it may effortlessly fit into any affairs and activities you may wish to undertake . . . If the location suits you best, it might be some place near Munich, Würzburg, for example—which I do not know—with its fine park and glittering Tiepolos . . . or some other little town in the countryside.

God, I have lost my last remnants of geography and can think of no places ; since I have known that there is that one place, your heart, I can take no others truly in earnest. Surely you know your geography, therefore you must dispose—I even suspect you are good at figures (oh, dear, I am not !). Please do not dazzle me too much with such

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

accomplishments, or else my guileless admiration will be tempered with too much respect . . .

(Now you will resort to the little windmill. Ah, if one but have a windmill to implore for aid! . . . May you be granted rest, may you be tired no longer—how well I know those torments!)

I shall have this letter registered, after all; otherwise I shall always fear that so small a letter, following upon such big and heavy ones, will simply be lost.

Rainer

Monday, February 16

Dear girl, I shall keep on addressing to your heart this incomprehensible journal of the life I would live . . . seek to tell you about myself truthfully, make myself brutally true to you, true, do you hear?—rather than worthy of being loved—as though, within your heart, I might for the first time make myself plain to God, that he know me. Lord, Lord, I would say, behold the naked metal of my being—how it has rung against the pavement like a coin tossed to a beggar (a large coin, on occasion, and why not?)—yet now it is a question of hus-

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

banding the ore, to see whether it may not fuse into that alloy from which shall be cast the bell, which thou mayest some day seek to strip from within me, if the mold please thee. Lord, imbue my heart with the sacred kinship that lies in this untested ore, that it may melt into an ingot possessed of a soul, a bronze sounding against the stone no longer, but ringing out in thy sweet air, wavering between the birds and the angels . . . Like St. John the Evangelist, in Memling's picture at Bruges—thus would I write you, here on the flinty island of my heart, across which sweep the storms of ecstasy. I would write you with mine right hand, write you with mine left, unceasingly, obeying the inscribed beam from above . . . What marvels have befallen us, befall us evermore! Sometimes I catch my breath, right in the middle of some task, on the street, while falling asleep or waking in the night—catch my breath and hearken whether they do befall forevermore. In truth, they do.

. . . . .

As a man, R. is my friend (in the true and yet not quite literal sense in which that is possible with men who have faith in each other, but who see each

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

other rarely and write even more rarely)—as a mind, that is . . . but were he 107 years old (rather than about my own age) and lived on a clouded mountain peak (rather than in H.), this might tangibly express the awe that sometimes seizes me, when I think of his inward greatness. That is what brought on these many pages today, and you, Magda, you must suffer them.

And here—if *you* were but to see my lectern, standing there like Niobe, stiff-legged, holding up its blank face as high as possible, epitomizing “abandonment”! I must take pity on it and once more think of work, with but an occasional pause for correspondence, no longer than befits a proper letter—these here are monsters, far beyond the epistolary stage, letter-titans railing against the gods that govern our hours. And should I nurse another of these giants that grow and keep on growing, I shall let it wax here in the drawer, a kind of diary for *you* to see but later, when it has attained adult stature and will open modestly in *your* hands for half an hour at a time, available whenever you turn to it.—May God grant that you forgive me all this helter-skelter.

*Et puis je vous écrirai une lettre française, pour*

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

*me plonger dans les vous, rien que dans les vous, vous verrez, ma chère chère amie.*

[Written in the margin:] Postscript: What follows came into being from sheer alarm over that "must," and by way of reaction to it. I have meanwhile made my peace with "Niobe"—therefore give no further thought to her "abandonment."

(Later:) What am I saying, my friend?—no, no, of course *you* must not—*need* not even, moreover. What insanity is this that comes over me, what manner of outburst? Even at night, when I lie there spewing no flame, it seems to me as though the fiery glow from my rebellious lava must stand above me as it does above Stromboli in the days of its eruption. Truly, it is not right that all this rain down on *you*, leaving the good folk in the *Grunehaus* baffled at being kept from *you* for all the invisible smoke and slag.

(Later at night)

May I ask you one thing outright, my familiar? It is this: Did you think me unfair . . . in writing

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

you another few lines about R. the other day? About *myself*, after all, I may tell you everything, but of another only what happens to be *within me*. Was that perhaps another time when it would have been in point to say: but René, how *could* you? . . . In human affairs I am forever afraid of doing the boorish thing; though it seems to me that evil dwells only in repeating lies, or gossip, or things still murky and in ferment. But where insight has simply and naturally settled into clarity, is one not entitled to communicate it to a fellow, even when it concerns a third person? How trivial are a few words like that, in the end, compared to the great residue all about us that is beyond expression, though we know that it alone commands authority! . . .

[February] 18.

. . . I just had a fine letter from Munich—there was a great fancy-dress affair for children at Ruth's friends, with the Children's Symphony by Haydn. An Italian by the name of Gallone conducted. Ruth played the cuckoo who, it seems, must carefully watch his cues and has no easy time of it at

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

all. What a curious and almost giddy consummation—to hear these children's voices disguised as birds and mingled with the sound of drum and violin, triangle and clavichord—I see it as a garden maze fashioned of Venetian glass, tinted and gray as cobweb: but surely it is clearer, airier, and simpler . . . . .

. . . . .

You play—and, wave upon wave, your love beats upon me, across the crowd. How often have I feared the influence of people who are far away! I think that distance is a path along which I am more defenselessly accessible than by the closest intimacy. How often something hovers over me—a wish, a spell—the cloud shadow of some distant feeling, the chill of an alien destiny! My heart lies open in a space of fearful conductivity—I cannot hide it, else should I hide it even from the stars . . .

Oh, love, should it be truly granted to become pure once again? Are there wellsprings that go untainted, even though they sweep away the dross within us? May such foul waters show their face in nature, who knows offal and ordure, but no evil,

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

nothing that runs counter to herself, since she flows about the outermost limits of even the most alien intrusion? . . .

Magda, beloved child: I speak to God in you and hence may boast within your heart. Magda, my art is of a splendor matched not even by the House of David. Magda, the golden pillars rise there like the trees in the forest, and woven into the images on the tapestries is no thread but that is true and fair in hue. How God must have stood by my side, that I may say *this*! May say it without taint, for I have lain in barrenness, bringing forth nothing.

And had I truly been a stone, all were well. But since I was not a stone, but rather in the image of a man laid low, the mighty forces I was wont to carry before me toyed with me in my wretchedness, as dream images toy with the sleeper. The forces of my childhood have toyed with me, my memories have toyed with me . . . and as befalls playthings, rather than growing keener over it, like a weapon much in use, I am become worn and broken—just like a toy.

And then, you see, there was the matter of ugliness. I could not shrink from it in my art, for it

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

was not my task to hold aloof from things, but rather to enter inside them. I did have the inwardness to feel that I was inside even the ugly. I durst not lie beside the leper—I was lacking in love and in my hands the canker would never have turned to its blissful opposite. No, I must enter deep into it, where even leprosy were still innocence, still partook of childhood; there I must rally all my strength, importune the scurf, dissuade it from any awareness of its taint; until at last it believed me—for therein lay its beauty, that it knew nothing of itself, that it simply *was*. And in the flower of this beauty I gained possession of it—it took on substance and entered into the world of my art . . .

[February] 19 (forenoon)

Reading this again today, another matter comes to me—that a certain turn in my approach may in the end have taken me beyond the purely lyrical realm (even though, in truth, my growth in large part lay in understanding the all-embracing character of that realm, the full extent to which the world enters into it). Be that as it may, there is a stirring and groping toward form and shape. These

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

would relieve one of many problems, would wrest them—if there were such things—from one's hands, so to speak, acknowledging them as their property.

. . . Ah, where are the times when I brewed my tea "lovingly," keenly aware of how it should be done (I learned the art in Russia), almost with solemn reverence at having been initiated into the mysteries of brewing a fragrant cup—where are those times? The most trivial undertaking has become a burden, an importunity, an impending delay, to be feared and to be done with. Since it became manifest more and more that I was incapable of love, love by and by withdrew from everything, and all that needed to be done grew balky and loveless; for when one who cannot love touches the merest thing, it struggles and would run away—I know not whither, perhaps where all things crave to be that suffer.

Since yesterday a big bowl filled with violets has been standing here. I seldom dare fetch flowers; for even the love of flowers has become a strain; their dreamy-eyed, serene, aloof assuagement is at odds with my intense preoccupation with cutting them, arranging them—I find their claim on me all

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

out of proportion . . . Morbid? Yes, to be sure. That does not startle me. I see it as nothing more than a sorry need of my nature for threading its way through all these roundabout multiplications, back to what is whole and sound. It tries to the best of its ability . . . This is the way I have hoped to accept it, time and again—but how tired I have grown along the way, tired tired tired! Weary to my very bones, like boys with growing pains, tired while walking, tired while lying down . . . Last summer I spoke to a few doctors here and there, in an effort to get rid of at least some of the pain and torment . . . Many a time my spirit yields to you in a sense of gladness, but my laggard body remains sluggish, as though it knew nothing, could no longer learn . . . Once it was carried away so easily, and there were times when I knew both states at once—its full-bodied vegetative joy, and the vibrant, hovering serenity of the soul . . .

And you, you actually played before Fräulein Hueber, of all people! There was a tiny pang inside me, as I first read the name "Olga." But when I came to think about it, truly, I do not know whether that was her name. Such, then, is my disposition toward fidelity! (A close look would prob-

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

ably reveal that I was in love only with the name "Hueber," or perhaps no more than that wonderful u-e—wretched me!) The other day, when I wrote you about her, amazed even to remember her, she was something halfway between a specter and a legend to me—and now it turns out that she actually existed, exists in some fashion even today! Will miracles never cease? That we both should have known her—that could never have happened in a story. People would say: Why, wouldn't you know it! But then, ours is not a story . . . Last night, gently waking up from time to time, from a sleep that was curiously spacious (I lay as though amid an exalted sleep-creation), I wrote down on slips of paper many things I simply had to tell you, on the spot—some of them I cannot even decipher.

Item: Flowering tree, gently breaking into blossom, its roots belatedly sunk in you. Hence all this gloom, this underground: it serves to hide me, to plant me more firmly in your dear soil.

Item: So valiant are you toward me—

Item: Love, love, is it not too much for thee? And then some scattered words I must still recall.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

(Toward evening)

Dear heart, what was it? I came back home from breakfast, after two, opened your telegram: it seemed to me as though you were talking in your sleep, troubled words filled with vague anxiety. What was it that moved you so deeply? Your wire was filed at five after twelve; that was just when I was writing all that troubled stuff about the flowers—did you sense it? Now I feel as though I should not send it to you at all. But look here, it is no worse than the other things, and then it will be past, and from it, as I tell it to you, with other casual things, with all my confidence, surrounded by it, by you—I think that from it you will understand my calm aloofness. You do understand, don't you?

I got a few things ready for the mail, then went to my little postoffice and sent this wire off to you: All well while I write long letter leaving tomorrow, well enough otherwise.

*This* is the letter, and it is to be mailed tomorrow morning at the latest. To call it "long" is almost a lie, for it is length personified. I was about to wire "long long," which would have been much truer, but then I remembered that such a thing was

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

waste in a telegram, and I swallowed the second 'long.' Yet I did not really get the full benefit of the two or three sous I thus saved, for no one counted them out to me. That is always the way.

. . . And now: Good night. All the things I have told you! You have my telegram, perhaps you even have the little letter I sent you yesterday—or it will reach you tomorrow morning at the latest.—And then, love, you will have all the rest . . . dearest, dearest . . .

Rainer Maria

Sunday

Oh, Magda, there was much I wanted to write you, and it will come in time—but how can I, at this moment, think of anything but this: You will be in Paris? There you go again and send me a few ready-made dates, shining with newness. Dear heart, not even the red print of the holidays—Easter and Whitsuntide and whatever their names—can cope with them. What a magnificent calendar you have contrived, love—fairer by far than any by Pope Gregory! It shall be the year of the

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

heart, and a thousand years hence people shall reckon by it, and God shall spend each Sunday with them, and tell them stories even the night before.

In point of fact, there is something I had wanted to ask you the other day, in a forward moment—whether you really thought you could settle things with your Paris agent by mail, for all time to come; and I wanted to confess that I should have thought that to be rather hazardous, in a place of such overweening importance. Meanwhile you have been able to see (by way of my letters in general) how swiftly such forwardness passes with me—will you scold me, shame me? I deserve it more than I know, but remember, you are dealing with a convalescent, taking his first faltering steps into joy, gently leaning on your shoulder. He grows apprehensive at his unwonted confidence, is compelled to sit down or even to turn back. All his valor vanishes, no sooner is he seized by a spell of dizziness, stabbed by a twinge of pain. For it brings to mind all too keenly the sudden changes and emotions that used to flash over him instantly, and since they were his only source of strength for so long, he now fancies himself ill because of the very vigor of his

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

recovery. Is this it? Or am I viewing it too indulgently, dear heart? . . .

My heart, when your letter came today I went to work at once . . . (you think, perhaps, to look for the aged couple or the dear old lady with whom you might stay?) . . . no, right here at home, undertaking a tremendous job of dusting, as though you might come within the hour. The *femme de ménage* had planned a country excursion, had come and left quite early—I was splendidly alone, when suddenly this old passion came over me, apropos of nothing. You must know that it was very nearly the greatest passion of my childhood, indeed, my first link to music, for our piano fell into my dusting precinct. It was one of the very few objects that lent themselves well to dusting, did not become tedious under the zealous dust-cloth. On the contrary, it would suddenly give a metallic hum and the fine somber reflections would deepen with effort. Oh, the thrill of it! The pride in the very uniform—the big apron and the protective little chamois gloves on the busy hands! There was a certain roguish decorum with which one responded to the friendship of these well-rested, well-treated objects.—And today too, I

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

must confess, when order was restored about me here, when the huge flat black desk about which everything revolves (it belongs to Rodin, by the way, and has been merely lent to me, for years) was imbued, in a sense, with a new awareness of the lofty light-gray room, almost cubic in shape, which it now reflected more perfectly—even today I felt in my mind as though all this were not merely something literally on the surface, but an event of beautiful significance deep in the soul, as when an emperor washes the feet of aged men or St. Bonaventura the tableware in his monastery.

But now it has grown so late over this unwonted emergence of my passion—for which you are to blame—that I must quickly close, to repair to my little restaurant for dinner; and I shall post this letter on the way, for it is a sad business to prowl the streets of a Sunday afternoon, with the shutters down on all the shops, and the people let out into a strange emptiness, bound for invisible amusements.

Your “elderly lady”—I wonder whether she still exists? Surely she survives in the country, and perhaps she was known even here only three or four years ago—but Paris is growing to such impersonal

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

and nondescript size! Still, I have no reason for doubting that I shall find the right thing, or something very close to it (just trust me)—after all, should we not also consider a *pension*, if one could dispense with eating there all the time? I anticipate with pleasure making some agreeable discovery—once upon a time Paris was just the place for such a thing; and I used to think that *only* here was it possible to pass from cherished image to reality. But even *here* realities no longer have the time to come into their homely own—you see I cannot forbear disparaging Paris—the very Paris I would glorify for you.—

Rainer Maria

February 21, toward evening

The weather is overtaking us with its March squalls. They scurry across the rainy sky, scarcely leaving it time for its downpour; and suddenly everything lies naked, and an unwonted lucency, almost vacant, shines up from the damp streets. It has been like that the whole night. Do you know that I am actually afraid, *in the city*, during such nocturnal storms? It seems almost as though they

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

never even take notice of us in their elemental pride. But take a solitary cottage in the country—that they see and embrace in their rugged arms and toughen—one wants out into the rustling garden, or stands by the window, at the very least, applauding the frenzied old trees that behave as though the spirit of the Prophets had laid hold of them.

How splendid—is it not?—that we are so closely akin to all this, so profoundly at one with it! That the pressure of our blood rises and falls with the counterpressure of the whole world; and verily, the body withstands it all, the heart within stands alone against all the rest.

How true it is, I thought yesterday, that the most fleeting relation between people is governed by the disposition with which they approach it! It is at once touched with significance—if only there *is* significance. No one alive with it can speak even to a cabby, but that an unwonted gentleness arises between the two, a joy in each other, a sacrament. I had some urgent errands, and everywhere things went well, everywhere I was met by eyes that bespoke a sense of amazement. Readiness dwelt in the people as in freshly turned Spring soil.—Near the end I visited a young Frenchman, a poet who

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

conducts a small trade in pictures in the rue de Seine, to fend off from his own art all that may be questionable; almost as though he knew this filter were bound to catch anything that still implied acquisitiveness and ulterior purpose, as though utter integrity alone could now swell the fine vessels of his plain-spoken poems. Ah, but in the end such filters grow more and more clogged with workaday precipitate! As it happened, love, I was able to give him solace, rich and warm, to tell him some deeply felt things about a few of his verses, which I had read the other day in a review. There was truth in it, deep truth, for only truth dwelt in my heart, to the farthest recess . . . Think of it, I spoke to him of you! Yes, I described briefly the kind of room I have envisioned here for you. He knows of many painters who come and go—there might be a chance of renting a studio, and such a place would offer the best space and scope for a piano.—

This made it clear to me, love, how little discretion there has always been in my life; whenever I had a secret, as a young man, I would reveal it; for I sensed people's displeasure—when anything was hidden, they would attach their foulest

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

thoughts to it. That tormented me—I wanted to anticipate them, show them how beautiful it was. Later on my solitude became so proverbial that many of the friends who stuck to me helped me precisely on its account, and thus I felt bound to take them on a tour inside me from time to time, to flash a light into all the corners, that they might see how clean empty it all was.

True, in my childhood I must have known of recesses within me where things might be stored that none was to find ; indeed I think most of what I lived through was in secret, partly because it was beyond expression in the first place, partly because there was no one in my environment to whom that which could have been expressed could be poured out without restraint. Again, during my military education, when not a single outward circumstance could be brought into harmony with my nature, already pledged to a definite trend, I committed treason to my sense of secrecy. To reveal the incongruity of my inward state was the only counterpoise at my disposal against a world which crudely prevailed over me on every side—a world which everyone about me, more or less willingly, acknowledged as right and extant, whereas

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

I rebelled against it, denied it in all its appearances, indeed, was obsessed to refute it by other realities . . . When I come to think of it, I yearned for a reality before which the monstrous everyday tedium enfolding me would stand revealed as puny, perplexed, humbled, outdistanced, indeed, hesitantly denying its own existence. Sometimes I looked for such a reality to my family, which would suddenly turn out to occupy a position of inconceivably high privilege heretofore denied it; at other times to some uncle who, through his connections with a great lord or even the Emperor himself, would exert a clarifying influence on my situation; again, from time to time it seemed to me that, strictly speaking, such intervention could be expected only of God, and then I felt on a footing of trust with him, held converse with him, in which I surely was not reticent with proposals for the doom of the military school. But when such urgent intercourse with God had reached a stage of ardor, something strange and incomprehensible happened: one could not win him over to any plan for destroying or humiliating one's outward environment, for the moment one spoke with him such a thing as a military institute no longer existed.

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

Just as, in later life, a powerful concentration of the mind sometimes sweeps away the sense of one's own body, leaving only the inexhaustible effort issuing from some innermost point of existence, so did the boy's great need, instinctively seeking access to the exalted, transcend its own motives. Out in the open, suspended in space so to speak, it took on the aspect of a pure and unconditional relationship, a magnificent, independent life of the soul. True, there was the temptation, at such times, to ascribe the responsibility to God ; but the feeling that even so one was equal to it, that one could withstand it, that one was able to enter instantly into God's purpose—that feeling expanded one's awareness to new breadths, becoming the basis for confronting oneself with inchoate but infinitely grand expectations. And these expectations set off a need for secrecy which one was quite beyond relinquishing. Here one faced one's own heart, yet the heart was closed—there was no basis for boasting on any score ; yet between confrontation and closure there was a correspondence that defied comprehension ; it held the silent majesty of law, a sense of poised life, of things yet to come. . . . Farewell . . . could I but write you everything with ease, my

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

dear ! Each time I halt, I am like the woman who left church fancying she had thoroughly prayed herself out—yet at the nearest corner she must retrace her steps, go in once more, and return to her knees.

Your fervent friend

February 24, early

. . . I pick up this sheet—but it always turns out that I have run over on another, letter upon letter ; none could wait in the drawer even for an hour, dearest—they all had to hurtle away toward you. I see it now, the world is still chockful of jealousy, a passion I have always been inclined to view as the most obsolete of all, drained of every trace of life. Scarcely do I sit down at the table, when my trunk rebels—my luggage, my baggage, or whatever you wish to call them collectively, for there are several among which I must pick and choose (it is their turn again, they insist). Yes, and I must support their claim, for they wish to come to you, and so, for that matter, do I . . .

Ah, but dear, what is there I can still quickly tell you, against myself ? How may I still warn you ?

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

Look, I would write you what I should have written you today in any event . . . Am I in the end deceiving you after all? . . .

That was a night, yesterday. Alas, I stood not on the pinnacle of my arrogance, waved no flags; not even in the chambers of valor did I dwell, nor look out the tall windows into the clean paths of the future . . . Oh, darling, once again I was deep in the dripping dungeons of my faintheartedness, deep, deep below; and what had fluttered bravely in the storm above—now it was scarcely more in my hands than a scrap of handkerchief, sodden with tears . . . Not long since, only two years ago, the call of a bird in the woods was all I needed to make me feel sound and glad and strong, body and soul. How often since then have I been in the country, by the sea, facing nature in all her power, only to feel a sense of weariness as I looked out, aware only of my impotence . . .

Wednesday morning, six o'clock.

Magda, oh, Magda, how unvaliant he who comes to you, how small in heart—one who would still wait, struggle, falter, prepare, write to you!

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

. . . Were I, love, but like the small voice of the bird outside, acknowledging in utter simplicity that day has come! At that, it is not overly joyous, that tiny voice of a city bird in February, yet had I but its little self-composed note of assent that day may come! Ah, I would first grow strong, and withstand danger with you in my heart, and come only then, in the image you have thought you sensed at times—slender, walking on air. Paltry and threadbare, dear heart, I come to you, all my impenetrable yesterdays still clinging to me.

. . . My heart shall reach out for your heart, as did the little John within Elizabeth for little Jesus within Mary—but is my heart pure enough for such sudden joy? . . .

Monday, toward noon

I think the whole postoffice must have sensed that “yes” I just wrote you, like a small temblor; surely no such word was written there before, with any of its wretched, splayed hackney pens—too bad you will not see it as I wrote it down. Despite the stubborn pen, it was *my* “yes,” every inch *my* “yes.” . . .

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

The day after tomorrow, Magda. My first impulse was to leave *today*—but then I told myself: no. I shall be generous, in this, the most generous event of my life—generous even toward time, toward everything here that must be settled and arranged. I shall be calm and composed. And so I wired you: Wednesday night . . . One more thing, in the matter of quarters—for years I have been in the habit of putting up at the *Hospiz des Westens*, 4 Marburgerstrasse (near the *Gedächtniskirche*). Shall I do so this time? Or is there a suitable boarding-house in the *Grunewald*? Wire me about this, as soon as you have this letter, please, but do not go to any trouble over it. I think your wire would reach me here on time Wednesday, so that I could leave my forwarding address. If you do not wire, I shall go to the *Hospiz* . . . And now I shall set to work with my packing and my arrangements, which I propose to contrive in such a way that I shall be supplied with everything, even books, whether for a short visit or an extended stay. In the matter of finding a place to live for you here, I shall write a few more letters and see one or two people, by way of preparation. For it will be much more difficult to get anywhere by

## LETTERS TO BENVENUTA

mail. And in the end even this is a fine thing—that I need not hurry, need not act this very day, but may quietly go forward, in God's own safekeeping, closer to you with every minute . . .

Magda!

Rainer







